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ABSTRACT

As a preliminary step within a comprehensive evaluation plan, direct observation of a "safety-net" academic enrichment component of the College Board's Equity 2000 Program, in the form of the Saturday Academy, was conducted by researchers from the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk/Howard University (RESPAR/HU) (Washington, D.C.) at two sites on campuses of institutions of higher education in a suburban school district. Saturday Academies provide academically supportive or enrichment activities for students on Saturdays, along with parent information. These observations were focused on specific instructional and support elements of the Equity 2000 program and on the presence and operation of elements, principles, and practices related to the Talent Development Framework/Model (A. Boykin, 1996). These preliminary observations were conducted to support refinement of study instruments and to set the stage for more controlled observations at a later date. The observations taken in the context of the Saturday Academy, are organized based on the operation of key "means to success" drawn from the Talent Development Framework. These preliminary observations show that five of the six essential elements of a successful learning environment are present to some degree in the Saturday Academies on these campuses. An appendix contains a site visit checklist. (Contains four references.) (SLD)

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Preliminary Observations of an Equity 2000 Program "Safety Net" Through the Lens of the Talent Development Framework

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Abstract

As a preliminary step within a comprehensive evaluation plan, direct observation of a "safety-net" component of the Equity 2000 program, in the form of the Saturday Academy, was conducted by researchers from the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk/ Howard University (CRESPAR/HU) at two sites located on campuses of institutions of higher education in a close-in suburban school district. These observations not only were focused on specific expected instructional and support elements related to the Equity 2000 Program, but also to discern the presence and operation of fundamental elements, principles and practices related to the Talent Development Framework/Model. This is an account of preliminary observations of the Saturday Academies that were conducted primarily to support refinement of instruments and to set the stage for more controlled observations to be conducted later. The following information that was presented at a roundtable session of the Talent Development Special Interest Group at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association in San Diego, California, will first provide general background on the Equity 2000 Program, followed by that on the Talent Development Framework/Model. An operational definition and brief description of the Saturday Academy is provided. Descriptions of the direct observations, which follow, are presented in relationship to the Talent Development Framework. The observations, taken in the context of the Saturday Academy, are organized in this document based on the operation of five key "means to success" drawn from the Talent Development Framework.

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Preliminary Observations of an Equity 2000 Program “Safety Net” Through the Lens of the Talent Development Framework

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Introduction and Background

As a preliminary step within a comprehensive evaluation plan, direct observation of a “safety-net” component of the Equity 2000 program, in the form of the Saturday Academy, was conducted by researchers from the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk/ Howard University (CRESPAR/HU). The observations were conducted at two sites located on campuses of institutions of higher education in a suburban school district bordering a large metropolitan area. These observations not only were focused on specific expected instructional and support elements related to the Equity 2000 Program, but also discerned the presence of fundamental elements, principles and practices related to the Talent Development Framework/Model (Boykin, 1996). This is an account of preliminary observations of the Saturday Academies that were conducted primarily to support refinement of instruments and to set the stage for more controlled observations. Secondly, the observations were to identify the presence and operation of essential elements of the Talent Development Framework/Model (TDF) within the activities of the Academies. The following information that was presented at a roundtable session of the Talent Development Special Interest Group at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego, California, will first provide general background on the Equity 2000 Program, followed by that on the Talent Development Framework/Model. An operational definition and brief description of the Saturday Academy is provided. Descriptions of the observations, which follow, are presented in relationship to specific means for ensuring student success that are components of the Talent Development Framework.

The Equity 2000 Program

The College Board’s Equity 2000 educational reform program, recently acclaimed by the Clinton Administration and others (Clinton, 1997), was designed to increase the overall academic achievement and college-attending rates of minority and disadvantaged students through enrollment and success in the “gatekeeper” courses of algebra and geometry, illustrative of their importance relative to college admissions and testing. Based on the premise that all children can learn and on research indicating that when low-income, minority students master algebra and geometry and have expectations to attend college, they tend to succeed in college at about the same rate as their non-minority peers (Pelavin and Kane, 1990), the program began in 1990 as a mathematics initiative in a single school district in Fort Worth, Texas. It expanded to include, by SY 1995-96, six sites and 14 school districts. The pilot sites include Milwaukee, WI.;

Providence, RI.; Fort Worth, TX.; Nashville, TN.; Prince George's County, MD.; and a consortium of 9 school districts in San Jose, CA. Altogether, this represents 700 schools which serve nearly half a million students (College Board, 1996).

The goal of Equity 2000 is to close the gap in the college-going and success rates between minority and non-minority, and advantaged and disadvantaged students. Equity 2000 is an example of systemic educational reform in participating school systems, utilizing a six-part model which includes the following components (College Board, 1996):

1. Creation of districtwide policy changes to end tracking and raise standards for all students, beginning with the requirement that all students complete algebra by ninth grade and geometry by tenth grade, and including reform of the curriculum to reflect standards set by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and other discipline-based organizations;
2. Establishment of ongoing professional development for teachers, counselors, and principals to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to raise their expectations for students;
3. Improvements in schools' involvement with students, parents, and families to create a consistent climate for learning as well as to empower parents to be advocates for their children's education;
4. Development of a "safety-net" for students through academic enrichment programs that provide extra academic support (It is this component that is focused on in this discussion.);
5. Formation of school-community partnerships that include links with colleges and universities;
6. Use of student course enrollment and achievement data broken down by ethnic group and gender to monitor progress toward reform goals.

Early evaluations of this program, primarily of process and largely descriptive, have reported preliminary outcomes that are favorable (College Board, 1996). In pilot sites, general mathematics classes in high schools have been virtually eliminated, with the vast majority of students enrolled in Algebra I by ninth grade. Regarding algebra achievement, passing rates have remained relatively high (53 to 80 percent in schoolyear 1994-95), given the larger numbers of students now taking the higher level mathematics courses. More positive outcomes were recorded for geometry enrollment (69 to 87 percent in SY 1994-95).

For a number of reasons, students of color and those that are "placed at risk" are less likely to take Algebra and subsequent mathematics courses, such as Geometry and Trigonometry. Equity 2000 was developed on the premise that if more students, especially students of color, take gate-keeping courses in high school, they will be more likely to succeed in the labor market and in higher education.

Proposed Extended Evaluation of the Equity 2000 Program

In light of early findings indicating that approximately 20% to 50% of students taking advanced mathematics courses were not successful in completing them, a plan for more comprehensive evaluation of the Equity 2000 Program was designed. The proposed evaluation, essentially crafted to identify specifically “what works” in producing successful outcomes for students and to identify “alternative pathways” to success for those students that have more difficulty in mathematics, was collaboratively planned by CRESPAR/HU and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) to be conducted during SY 1997-98. The evaluation workplan included such activities as analysis of archival data on matriculation patterns, conducting interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, direct observation of mathematics instruction, and direct observation of “safety-net” or support features in two of the pilot school districts. This report focuses specifically on a single component of the planned comprehensive evaluation project in describing preliminary observations conducted by CRESPAR/HU researchers at two sites (identified here as Site A and Site B) that are involved in providing “safety-net” services to groups of high school students from a metropolitan area suburban school district that is committed to the Equity 2000 Program. The form of student support described here is termed the Saturday Academy. Structured, direct observations were conducted by CRESPAR/HU staff, through the prism of the “talent development framework”, illuminating many of the key elements of the model in operation. This preliminary work was aimed at (1.) supporting the development of more stringent and sophisticated observation instruments and procedures; (2.) setting the stage for further, more controlled observations later, as a part of the more comprehensive study; and (3.) identification in program activities key elements of the Talent Development Model.

The Saturday Academy

Saturday Academies are typically structured to provide on the weekend (Saturday) academically supportive and/or enrichment activities to students, and usually to address parent needs for information to enable them to better help their children at home and to become effective advocates for their children at school. Saturday Academies come in a variety of forms and contexts. Most include a schedule of structured, usually more active or “hands-on” learning activities, a technology session (i.e., use of computers), a career counseling feature, and incorporate cooperative learning techniques. The content is usually sufficiently challenging, designed to be fun, and often involves problem solving. Some activities are planned to involve parents with their children. Due to necessity, free child care for younger siblings of academy participants is often included. The observed operations reported on here included the elements and features mentioned above that are generally characteristic of Saturday Academies and due to their Equity 2000 nature (College Board, 1996), also included activities specifically related to algebra and geometry. After briefly providing an overview of the Talent Development Framework, the observations at the Saturday Academy sites, relative to it, are described.

The Talent Development Framework

CRESPAR/HU maintains that the Talent Development Framework (TDF) offers prospects for better pedagogy than that provided by the traditional approach to schooling. It is also posited that the model offers better use of human resources, better quality school environments and is more responsive to present and future economic and social realities. The TDF starts with the premise that all children can learn. As opposed to a talent sorting framework in the traditional paradigm, the talent development model asserts that all children can learn successfully and learn in demanding, high expectation settings. All children can learn, because essentially all children do learn in and beyond school settings. (Note: Saturday Academies held at post-secondary institutions qualify as out-of-school settings in which children do learn.)

The Talent Development Framework is manifested in the notion of multiple determinants for success. It is CRESPAR/HU's position that it is important to simultaneously establish multiple means for ensuring student academic success, with the intent of "overdetermining" such success. The means for ensuring student success within the framework are:

- Fortifying students where they are vulnerable;
- Insuring that peers are functionally supportive;
- Insuring functional involvement of parents, family and community;
- Preparing school personnel to be TD advocates and practitioners;
- Delivering responsive, challenging pedagogy;
- Configuring effective organizational structures and practices.

Methodology

Schedules and Facilities

Observations were conducted of the Equity 2000 Saturday Academies in a school district serving a county of nearly 800,000 people in a large state in the northeastern region of the country. To give the relative size of the school district, of the approximately 126,000 students in the school system, about 35,000 were in grades 9 through 12 in SY 1997-98. The two Saturday Academy sites were designed to accommodate up to 200 students each and are located on the campuses of institutions of higher education, one a community college (Site A) and the other a four-year private university (Site B). Beginning in March, the Saturday Academies provide services for 6 weeks. All observed activities were conducted in classrooms on the respective campuses, which included impressive computer laboratories that were utilized by program participants at each hosting institution. Sessions at each site ran from 8:30 AM to 1:00 PM. Observations were conducted within that timeframe on April 12, 1997 (Site A) and March 14, 1998 (Site B). These dates represented the third week of the series of sessions for Site A and the second week for Site B. The facilities at both sites were observed as clean, comfortable and conducive to learning. No mounted materials, such as posters and bulletin-board displays, specifically targeted for Academy participants, were observed in the classrooms or hallways.

Participants and their Selection

Participating students from schools located in the southern and central region of the county are assigned to Site A and students from schools located in the northern portion are assigned to Site B. Students in each site were from as many as 13 senior high schools. Most students are recommended by teachers and counselors for participation in the Equity 2000 Saturday Academy based on prior below standard (generally below C average) performance in mathematics. Others self-select or are placed by concerned, astute parents or guardians. Site A had an enrollment of 175 students, with an absence rate of approximately 15%, as reported by the program director. The enrollment at Site B exceeded the target number of 200 students, experiencing the largest group it had handled, with 236 students participating. At that location, reportedly 274 parents attended on the opening day, necessitating further logistical adjustments.

Academy Administrators and Instructors

The Saturday Academies at each site are headed by a Director that provides overall supervision and coordination of the program and performs administrative duties. The director at each site is a faculty member of the hosting institution, at Site A a professor of mathematics, and at Site B a professor of education and human development. The directors are responsible for the design of the program, its content, and scheduling of the sessions. They were observed at each site making the rounds during the instructional sessions, generally observing and supporting the instructors, and “trouble shooting” when necessary. Instructional activities are implemented by certified mathematics teachers, assisted by tutors, counselors, mentors, and volunteers. Staffing patterns were not consistent across sites, in that one site put more resources into clerical support (Site A), while the other site used more in-class support. At Site A, each group of students, ranging in number from 23 to 25, were instructed by a certified teacher and a counselor, with at least one student volunteer (i.e., former academy student participants). This represents a student to adult ratio of approximately 13 to 1. Site B deployed a certified teacher, mentor teacher, a counselor, and student volunteer with each group of participants. The student to adult ratio at Site B was approximately 11 to 1.

Observers and Instrumentation

Observers were CRESPAR/HU research staff including two graduate students, trained in systematic observation of classroom behavior using CRESPAR-developed structured observation checklists, on which targeted instructional features were checked off and field notes were made. The observation checklist, in the form of a grid, was designed to gather process data by providing for the indication as to whether or not a described expected feature of the Academy was observed. Additionally, an adjacent column was included for the recording of general comments relating to each feature. This “comment” column was also used to record notes on observations related to Talent Development Model elements (See Appendix A for instrument). The major expected features that were observed for included interactive instruction; questioning that called for higher order thinking; cooperative learning techniques; relation of algebra and geometry to real-world application; use of calculators and computers; promotion of motivation and positive mathematics academic self concept; and enthusiasm among instructors and participants. Observers were also asked to note the presence and applications of the means for

determining student success associated with the Talent Development Framework. Observations were conducted by teams of two observers at both sites who moved together from area to area. At Site A, a third observer was also a parent participant in the academy. Therefore, she did not accompany the rest of the team as they moved from class to class, but recorded observations from within the parent component. At this preliminary stage, inter-observer reliability was not calculated. However, a cursory comparison of checklist products and observer notes indicated general agreement on practically every item. Observation checklist (forms) were compiled and subjected to content analysis.

Observations

- Talent Development Framework mean to success (1): Fortifying children where they are vulnerable; through providing supportive and integrated academic, personal and social services; through tutorial assistance as needed; and through fostering resiliency in them.

Related Observations: The Saturday Academy is, to some degree, providing academic support (or fortification) to students that are taking higher level mathematics courses (algebra and geometry) in high school. For some of these students at each of the sites, it appears that resiliency is fostered in the interaction with qualified, energetic and generally sensitive instructors. Saturday Academy instructors were observed fostering resiliency and determination in a number of their communications that went beyond exclusively instructional exchanges with their students. For example, one instructor at Site B remarked to his group in a serious but kind manner, that “I don’t know you, but I love you enough not to let you mess up this morning.” Another instructor at the same site, but in another class, admonished his charges to always maintain high standards in their work, emphasizing the use of complete sentences in all of their answers. Additionally, parents were provided, orally and in writing, information on the traits of successful (and resilient) students, including self-motivation, positive thinking, knowledge of goals, and knowledge of self.

- Talent Development Framework means to success (2 and 3): Insuring that peers, family members and the local community are supportive of students’ success.

Related Observations: Evidence of support from peers was observed at each site in many of the Saturday Academy activities that were “cooperative” in nature, involving groups of participants working together to accomplish a common goal, while encouraging and supporting each other. Student team-building was built into many activities, considered by the observers to represent a means of providing peer support. At Site A, students worked cooperatively to build a starting gate, ramp and timing gate to measure the elapsed time for a model car to traverse it. At Site B, one such activity involved groups composed of four students rolling dice to arrive at dimensions for triangles. One member of the group rolled the dice; another member manned the calculator; another member recorded the values on paper; while the remaining member completed the geometric representation on the chalkboard. The groups appeared to generally function very cooperatively and frequently made positive, reinforcing comments to each other on their performances of tasks. Academy personnel circulated about the room observing each group as

they worked, offering suggestions and guidance as needed. They also were observed providing positive reinforcement to students. Regarding parental support, at both Saturday Academy sites, high proportions of parents were in attendance. Understandably, child care for younger siblings of Academy students increased parent participation substantially. The director at one site observed that transportation is an even greater barrier to participation for Hispanic students in their geographical area, in that many of the families do not have cars.

Some activities were included in the day's itinerary that directly involved parents with their children, providing opportunity for direct support to take place. At Site A, an activity in orienteering was observed in which students along with their parents, used solutions to mathematical riddles to locate and move to different locations around the campus. Other activities were arranged for the groups individually. Parent sessions were observed in both sites to include general information on how to provide support to their children. At Site B, information on such topics as organization, study skills and test-taking was discussed and given to parents in written form. A parent at Site A, however, expressed that she would have liked to have had more specific information on how to help her son, based on his individual needs. She saw the parent activities of that day as being more of a "pep-rally" in nature, surely beneficial for some of the parents, but not exactly meeting her primary needs. At Site B, parents were additionally provided with their own copy of the graduation requirements and four-year planner produced by the school district to ensure that the parents and their children can be clear on expectations and to facilitate better personal and family planning.

The involvement of the institutions of higher education (i.e., a college and a university) as hosts of the Saturday Academies is evidence of support to the students that comes from at least one major area of the broader community. The academies are administrated by faculty members of the post-secondary institutions that also supply a great number of the instructors and counselors.

- Talent Development Framework mean to success (4): Providing effective, engaging and responsive academic content and contexts.

Related Observations: The academic content of activities designed for use in the Saturday Academies generally meet the criteria set forth by the TDF. Learning activities of a "hands-on" nature, involving manipulatives and requiring active learner participation, were characteristic of most of those observed at both sites. An example at Site A was again the building of a model car, starting gate, and timing gate to measure with a computer the time it took the car to traverse a ramp. Another example, at Site B, was the development of data tables and related graphs on population growth characteristics using various colored candies to represent segments of the population. Incidentally, devouring the data at the end of the activity appeared to be great fun for the participants, as well. At Site A, critical thinking skills and computers were used by students working in pairs to solve geometry problems.

- Talent Development Framework mean to success (5): Reconfiguring schools into organizational structures that expand beyond the walls of the building.

Related Observation: The involvement of, in this case, two post-secondary institutions from the broader community represents a fundamental restructuring of the traditionally self-contained school and school system, reforming to include more of the “whole village” in the development of the children.

Additional Observations: At Site A, observers attended a staff debriefing session that was held at the end of the day. In that session, attended by all program staff members, the director primarily solicited feedback from them on what went well with their activities for the day, and on what was in need of modification or improvement. Staff members’ suggestions and recommendations were accepted and noted by the administrator (i.e, director).

Discussion

These preliminary observations of an important component of a major educational reform initiative (Equity 2000 Program) indicate that five of six essential elements of the Talent Development Framework, multiple means/determinants that should be simultaneously present in the learning environment for student success, are present and in operation to some degree at the selected Equity 2000 Saturday Academies. Determining to what degree was beyond the scope of this very preliminary work, but is intended for measurement in future research activities. Therefore, one should not infer that Equity 2000 Saturday Academies necessarily operate within the Talent Development Framework. Based on the observations presented at this time, more sensitive ethnographic techniques and their application, to perhaps include videotaping, are warranted and planned, to extend into the more comprehensive evaluative study of Equity 2000. It is also planned that this further work will include the specific focus on the presence and operation of principles, themes, and practices related to the Talent Development Framework. Inclusion of this particular focus can serve to enhance the understanding and explanation of the observed successful practices, particularly as applied to the targeted population of students “placed at risk”.

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APPENDIX A

Basic Site Visit Checklist

Date: _____ Site location: _____
 Observer: _____

Attendance

Number of students _____ Number of parents _____

Were most of the participants punctual? Yes _____ No _____

What is the student to teacher/tutor ratio on average? _____ to 1

Learning Environment

Comfortable? (adequate space, heat, light) Yes _____ No _____

Stimulating or motivating (math-related) displays present? Yes _____ No _____

Description	Observed	Not Observed	Comments
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Interactive instruction - students ask questions and receive feedback			
Higher order questioning used by teachers			
Students verbalize/explain solutions			
Students cooperate in solving problems			
Students use manipulatives/model			
Development of math concept(s)			

Relation of algebra/geometry to real-world problems			
Use of calculators			
Use of computers			
Promotion of motivation			
Promotion of positive math self concept			
Focus on algebra			
Focus on geometry			
Teacher/tutor enthusiasm			
Student enthusiasm			

General impressions, additional observations and considerations for future observations:
[Include any information concerning the observation of elements of the Talent Development Model.]



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